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Summary record of the 18th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 2 November 2000, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Ms. Dinic (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Croatia)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 116: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (*continued*) (A/54/793; A/55/352 and Corr.1, A/55/499 and A/55/514)

Agenda item 123: Human resources management (*continued*) (A/53/955; A/54/257, A/54/279 and Corr.1 and A/54/450; A/55/57 and Add.1, A/55/168, A/55/253 and Corr.1, A/55/270, A/55/397, A/55/399 and Corr.1, A/55/427, A/55/494, A/55/499 and A/55/514; A/55/514; A/C.5/54/2 and A/C.5/54/21; A/C.5/54/L.3; A/C.5/55/L.3; A/C.5/55/CRP.1 and CRP.2)

1. **Mr. Grandjean** (President of the Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations (FICSA)), said that, in view of the lead role played by the United Nations, the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management reform (A/55/253 and Corr.1) was of major importance for the entire common system, in particular the specialized agencies from which FICSA drew the majority of its membership. It should therefore be the subject of broad consultations to avoid conflict with initiatives taken at the common system level and to draw from the experience of other organizations.

2. Although the United Nations management had made great efforts to seek the support of the staff for its proposals, it was apparent that the staff did not consider that the consultations had been satisfactory. That was in contrast to a similar exercise that had been conducted in the World Health Organization (WHO) as a joint venture between staff and management which, although falling short of the principle of collective bargaining enshrined in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, had been broadly satisfactory and had secured the general support of the WHO Staff Association. The staff of the United Nations, however, did not feel involved in the reform and did not trust the process. In that context, he noted the satisfactory outcome of the fiftieth session of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Board the previous July where the Board's tripartite structure, associated with a broad commitment to work for the common good, had borne fruit. A project such as the reform of human resources management in the United Nations was amenable to the same process.

3. The reform was being proposed against the background of pressures that had constrained the budget of the Organization for the past 10 years or so. The premise was that the United Nations would deliver ever more in terms of programmes with ever less in terms of financial resources. The staff of the intergovernmental organizations, supported by some of the executive heads, considered that there was a limit to the slimming-down process and that the time had come to reconsider certain assumptions underlying the programme and budget.

4. The report of the Secretary-General abundantly illustrated the magnitude of the problem: for example, paragraph 11 (d) drew attention to the unprecedented number of vacancies (500 regular budget and 2,400 extrabudgetary posts). That seemed to indicate that the managers of the United Nations were putting the dedication of their colleagues under strain, that essential services were not being rendered and that the future was being compromised by excessive concentration on short-term needs.

5. Although the General Assembly had acknowledged, over a decade previously, that the terms and conditions of service were no longer competitive, the claims put forward by the staff had been rather modest in recent years. The reform document was silent on that issue. It referred to the need for a competitive compensation package to attract and retain high-quality staff and a good working environment but proposed nothing concrete. That was in spite of the fact that the Secretary-General, in his capacity as the representative of all the executive heads, had recently urged the International Civil Service Commission to address the issue of a real increase in the base/floor scale. Moreover, the representative of the United Nations had stated that consideration should be given to recommending a real salary increase. Although reference was made in the document to the need to attract, retain and motivate staff of the highest calibre at all levels, there was no attempt to address the associated cost of attaining that objective.

6. While FICSA could support many of the measures that had been taken, or that were envisaged for the future, the report failed in many respects to follow through its own logic, above all by not addressing the question of cost and thus indirectly suggesting that the reform was cost-neutral and there was no need to offer competitive salaries. FICSA urged the Committee to postpone the decision on the

document pending the receipt of detailed supplementary information, for example on the nature and implications of the proposed continuing appointment, as compared with the existing permanent and indefinite appointments.

7. One major omission was a recognition of the legitimate role of staff representatives and their right to be consulted on human resources policies and practices and to be given the opportunity to participate in and influence decisions on those matters. The proposed reform apparently reduced the role of staff representatives in the crucial area of recruitment. More participatory approaches towards the staff of the Organization were essential if the United Nations sincerely wished to address its staff recruitment and retention problems.

8. In conclusion, he said that numerous United Nations posts would soon be vacated in addition to those already vacant, and UNDP was laying off hundreds of staff members as a result of the downsizing and redeployment of its New York activities. He urged the Committee to instruct the management of the United Nations to face the opportunities raised by the "internal reality" of the 2,900 vacant posts, as stated in paragraph 11 (d) of the report. In short, the staff would like to see a more focused, proactive and effective plan of action which made a reality of the objective of putting people at the centre, as stated by the Secretary-General in paragraph 9 of the report.

9. **Ms. Madarshahi** (President of the Coordinating Committee of International Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System (CCISUA)) begin by drawing attention to two position papers submitted by CCISUA in connection with the items under consideration: document A/C.5/55/CRP.1 contained its comments on the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management reform (A/C.5/55/253 and Corr.1) and document A/C.5/55/CRP.2 addressed the reform of the internal justice system. The latter paper offered a comprehensive proposal by CCISUA on the subject and complemented the report of the Joint Inspection Unit in document A/55/57.

10. The staff of the Organization, and of the United Nations system as a whole, was firmly committed to the values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility which had been highlighted at the Millennium Summit as fundamental values governing international relations in the new century. Change would be inevitable in order to realize those noble goals and the staff would support the Member States in any efforts to change procedures, structures and policies in order to create a more effective, credible and relevant organization capable of serving the peoples of the world. That could not, however, be a one-sided effort; the staff needed some assurance from management that the reform was to be a joint endeavour and would be carried through to completion in cooperation with the staff and with a respect for existing staff-management agreements.

11. On completion of the reform process the staff hoped that the Organization would emerge stronger, more effective, better equipped and more able to face the challenges of an increasingly complex world. To that end, the staff wished to work with management in parity and harmony and with open-mindedness on a basis involving communication, participation and agreement. The International Labour Office had led the way by entering into formal agreement with its staff with the concurrence of the member Governments. It was hard to see why such an agreement should not be emulated in other organizations. Yet, staff-management relations over the preceding 12 months had not involved consultation in the true sense. The staff representatives had expressed their disagreement with numerous aspects of the proposed reform programme and had put forward proposals, in particular, for improved arrangements relating to staff mobility and training, improved staff-management machinery and the adoption of a transparent approach to resolving the environmental problems besetting the Secretariat building.

12. The staff positions concerning the proposed human resources management reform as set out in document A/C.5/55/CRP.1 were consistent with the position taken by the General Assembly in its resolutions 51/226 and 53/221 concerning, in particular, the imperative of establishing a well-designed mechanism of accountability. On contractual arrangements the staff was firmly in favour of the retention of the institution of the permanent appointment which it regarded as conducive to the independence of the international civil service as recognized by the Charter and as a means of securing equitable geographical representation, equal representation of women and the retention of a

modicum of institutional memory. Above all, such contracts promoted the values of loyalty and commitment to the Organization, and to the international civil service as a whole. In that connection, the staff supported the General Assembly's call for a ratio of 70 per cent permanent appointments to 30 per cent temporary appointments in accordance with the provisions of resolutions 51/226 and 53/221.

13. The new system of appointment and promotion as proposed by the Secretary-General did not set out a clear-cut system of accountability. The Office of Human Resources Management would no longer have a central function in establishing and implementing human resources policies and practices. The proposed decentralized system would make programme managers responsible for such matters and the staff were concerned that that might give rise to a new type of cronyism. The staff comments on the Secretary-General's proposal to abolish the joint machinery for appointments and promotions were set out in paragraphs 12 to 14 of document A/C.5/55/CRP.1.

14. The staff acknowledged that mobility was an important factor in the employment and career development of an international civil servant but felt that the Secretary-General's proposals had not been convincingly argued. The basic principles underlying the proposals for mobility did not adequately allow for the loss of contact with cultural and family bonds and ties experienced by staff members who had left their home countries. Above all, the proposed mobility scheme showed scant respect for institutional knowledge and memory which would be hard to maintain under a system of constant rotation. It might also be seen as incompatible with the precept of the Charter that the Organization should only retain staff meeting the highest standards of competence and integrity.

15. The high regard in which many United Nations attitudes and practices were held throughout the world did not extend to its labour practices, in particular the conciliation, mediation and conflict resolution procedures and those in the areas of internal appeals and administrative justice on labour-related cases. The proposals of CCISUA for a new system of justice in the Secretariat were set out in document A/C.5/55/CRP.2. She hoped that the Committee would find time at the current session to review the issue thoroughly and decide to establish the long overdue new system of justice.

16. The present arrangements regarding staff-management relations were also in urgent need of review, and she felt that the issue should be handled along the lines exemplified by the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Board, ICSC and ILO.

17. In conclusion, she drew attention to the dangers of the working environment in the Headquarters building and in facilities in other cities, such as Vienna and Jerusalem. In particular, the question of asbestos abatement needed to be addressed systematically and openly. The same applied to other health hazards, such as the existence of electromagnetic fields in the Headquarters building, which were the direct result of outdated equipment. Fire hazards were another potentially deadly issue in a building which had no sprinklers and which fire engines could not approach closely as the ground was apparently incapable of bearing the weight of such heavy vehicles. Such a situation would be regarded as intolerable in any Member State, and she urged the Committee, as a matter of priority, to approve a comprehensive remedial programme addressing all environmental hazards and upgrading the fire and safety measures.

18. **Mr. Fedorov** (Russian Federation) said that it was already possible to make a preliminary assessment of the measures being implemented to reform human resources management in the United Nations to adjust their direction and to plan further steps to achieve the objectives of the reform. However, the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management reform (A/55/253 and Corr.1) raised a number of questions that required answers.

19. In paragraph 3 of the introduction, he was surprised to read that significant progress had been achieved in carrying forward the reform, particularly as the document as a whole seemed to indicate that, in certain key areas of human resources management, the reform was making little progress.

20. Paragraph 25 (a) referred to the development by the Office of Human Resources Management of a skills inventory for all existing staff. In that connection, he pointed out that the year 2000 was nearly over but no information had been provided indicating that the project was close to completion.

21. Paragraph 25 (b) said that OHRM would continue to develop a human resources forecasting and modelling capacity. However, it appeared that the Secretariat had little time for modelling or for more

effectively assessing needs at a time when, as pointed out in paragraph 11 (d) of the report, the number of vacant posts had reached 500 regular budget and 2,400 extrabudgetary posts. In addition, it had to be borne in mind that that during each of the next five years, up to 400 staff members were due to retire. There was no indication in the document of any practical steps being taken by OHRM to resolve the problem of the ageing of the Secretariat. In that connection, his delegation shared the view expressed by ACABQ in paragraph 5 of document A/55/499.

22. Paragraph 35 (c) said that programme managers were to be responsible for taking the final decision on the selection of staff for specific posts. However, the appointment of staff had to be made on the basis of merit, paying due regard to the principles of geographical representation and gender balance which, according to paragraph 12 of document A/55/397, were the responsibility of OHRM, a fact that reduced to a minimum the freedom of programme managers to decide on the selection of staff. Moreover, paragraph 35 (e) of document A/55/253 said that, in the event of problems with respect to compliance with the selection process the case would be referred to the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management. Moreover, paragraph 34 of the same document did not refer to efficiency, competence and integrity as being among the principles underlying the Organization's staff selection policies. The situation, therefore, was that, on the one hand, OHRM was not responsible for staff recruitment but it was, at the same time, the chief arbiter that took the final decision.

23. Referring to annex II, paragraph 14 (a), of the document, he asked in what circumstances no vacancy announcement was needed and suggested that it might be on the basis of document A/55/397 paragraph 31 (c) where reference was made to "a roster of qualified candidates as an alternative to the vacancy announcement". In addition, he pointed out that, in paragraph 21 of annex II it was essential to specify time limits for the resubmission of recommendations so as to comply with the time limit of 120 days for filling vacancies.

24. Regarding mobility (section D), his delegation supported the principles set out in annex II to the report of the International Civil Service Commission for the year 2000 (A/55/30). Career progression should not depend only in part on evidence of mobility, as proposed in paragraph 5 (d) of annex III to the report before the Committee (A/55/253), but to a great extent. The transfer of staff members between divisions, departments and even occupational groups within the same duty station could not be called mobility. Regrettably, the report did not focus on field service as an integral part of a career with the United Nations, nor did it deal adequately with the problem of reabsorption of staff following mission assignment. His delegation supported, in that connection, the recommendation made in paragraph 14 of the related report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) (A/55/499).

25. He welcomed the new mechanisms for increasing mobility. He could not, however, support the training and learning programmes proposed in paragraph 23 of annex III to the report, since the allocation of budgetary resources for any training other than advanced training was inappropriate. The concept of lateral mobility remained unclear to him. Staff members unsuccessful in finding new posts by the time the occupancy-limit in respect of their current posts expired should be separated from the Organization rather than reassigned. Mobility should not become a means of transferring underperforming staff members from one division or department to another, thus impeding the recruitment of new, qualified specialists from outside the Organization. While his delegation would support further measures to increase mobility, it considered that the Administration should make more effective use of the tools already available to it under the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules. It appeared from the report that the Secretariat was continuing to promote staff members serving in the General Service and related categories to the Professional category, notwithstanding the provisions of General Assembly resolution 53/221. He wished to have a breakdown by country of the staff members promoted since 1 July 1999 and to receive clarification as to the reasons for which internal vacancy announcements continue to be issued in respect of posts at the P-2 level. The promotion of staff members in contravention of decisions taken by the Assembly must cease and disciplinary action must be taken against the persons responsible.

26. Turning to the issue of contractual arrangements (section E), he said that the time had come to streamline the multiplicity of types and conditions of appointments. The abolition of permanent appointments would reflect the needs of the times. It

was not clear from the report, however, how the proposed continuing appointments would differ from the existing arrangements. He wished to know, for example, what indemnity would be paid to staff members whose appointments were terminated by the Administration, and whether there were plans to simplify the procedure for the dismissal of staff members whose services were unsatisfactory. As his delegation had requested in 1998, ICSC and JIU should prepare a comprehensive study on the subject of a gradual transfer by the United Nations to a system of non-career appointments.

27. With regard to competencies and continuous learning (section G), there should be a strong emphasis on self-study programmes. As to performance management (section H), the measures set out in paragraph 12 of annex VII to the report for dealing with under performance were unacceptable. Apparently, efforts were made to assess the skills and competencies of poor performers in order to find assignments that corresponded better with their skills. Surely, it was for staff members to adapt themselves to the needs of the Organization and not the other way round.

28. Paragraph 3 of annex VII referred to an additional performance management process for senior managers. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on senior-level appointments in the United Nations and its programmes and funds (A/55/43) was of considerable interest in that regard. He looked forward to the report's introduction in the Committee and to the issuance of an official document containing the comments of the Secretary-General thereon.

29. Regarding the report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat (A/55/399), he said that the establishment of gender balance, which was to have been a gradual process, was being rushed and had become an end in itself. Indeed, heads of offices were being urged to reflect progress towards the goal of 50/50 gender distribution in the appraisal of the performance of managers. There were even units in which women actually outnumbered men. Yet, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, the main criteria in recruiting staff should be efficiency, competence and integrity, not gender. The decision to give preference to women not only in the recruitment process, but also in respect of promotion (ST/AI/1999/9) was a mistake.

30. Lastly, with reference to the report of the Secretary-General on safety and security of United Nations personnel (A/55/494), he said that he saw no justification for the proposal to appoint a Security Coordinator at the Assistant Secretary-General level, given that there was already a Security Coordinator at the Under-Secretary-General level. He wished to know what resources were allocated from the regular budget to fund the Office of the Security Coordinator, at Headquarters and in the field.

Agenda item 17: Appointments to fill vacancies in subsidiary organs and other appointments (*continued*)

(g) Appointment of members of the International Civil Service Commission (*continued*)

31. **Ms. Aragon** (Philippines) announced the withdrawal of the candidature of Ms. Corazon Alma G. de Leon for appointment to the International Civil Service Commission.

Other matters

32. **Mr. Bender** (Chief of the Facilities Management Division), replying to the questions posed by the representative of Costa Rica at the Committee's 15th meeting, held on Monday, 23 October 2000, confirmed that construction work had been undertaken on the fourth floor of the Secretariat building in the premises occupied by the United Nations Federal Credit Union. In addition, a certified contractor had carried out asbestos abatement in the same location. However, no asbestos-containing materials had been disturbed during the construction work. Air-quality tests and sampling for asbestos fibres had been conducted before, during and after the abatement activity, and the measured values had been found to be well below the established safe thresholds. The Office of Central Support Services was taking all necessary measures to safeguard the health and well-being of all occupants of the building. Since asbestos-containing materials had been widely used in the building at the time of its construction, a definitive solution to the problem would be achieved only with the implementation of the capital master plan prepared by the Secretary-General.

33. **Ms. Incera** (Costa Rica) said that air-quality tests conducted on behalf of the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica in the area in question had confirmed the presence of asbestos fibres, indicating that asbestos-containing

materials had indeed been disturbed during the construction work, which had not been confined to the Credit Union premises. Furthermore, the area had not been sealed during the abatement activity. She would like to see a copy of the contract concluded with the company that had undertaken that work. Her delegation had previously drawn attention to the high electrical and magnetic field (EMF) levels on the twenty-seventh floor of the Secretariat building and to the high incidence of certain types of cancer among staff members working on that floor. She had therefore been concerned to discover that, while a number of staff members had been relocated to other floors, their offices had been occupied by other staff members, exposing them to the same hazards.

34. Regarding the fire that had broken out on the twenty-eighth floor on Friday, 27 October 2000, she asked whether it was true that the fire trucks of the New York City Fire Department had been prevented from approaching the Secretariat building because of the risk that the garage ceiling would collapse under their weight, and, if that was the case, how the Administration would cope with a large blaze. She also wished to know where the fire hydrants were located.

35. **Mr. Bender** (Chief of the Facilities Management Division) said that, during the construction work undertaken on the fourth floor, parts of the ceiling had been opened. It had been decided, at that time, to remove certain asbestos-containing materials that had become accessible. However, no asbestos-containing materials had been disturbed during the construction work itself. The removal of those materials had been carried out by a licensed contractor under the supervision of in-house staff, who had ensured that all the proper precautions were taken. The affected area had been completely sealed, and there had been full compliance with the procedures established by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection. The results of the air-quality testing performed before, during and after the asbestos removal had been transmitted to the Medical Services Division. Air quality in the building as a whole was tested every six months and had always been found satisfactory.

36. The smoke incident on the twenty-eighth floor had been dealt with promptly by the employees of the Consolidated Edison Company, and no one had been harmed. There were Siamese connections at the Forty-Third Street vehicle entrance to the Secretariat building for the use of the New York City Fire Department. The Fire Unit of the Security and Safety Service was able to deal with small fires and had a direct link to the Fire Department in case of major blazes.

37. **Ms. Incera** (Costa Rica) said that the Chief of the Facilities Management Division had left many of her questions unanswered. His failure to take account of the results of the air-quality tests conducted on behalf of the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica was lamentable. The results of the Secretariat's tests were of questionable value, since they were carried out in the corridors, rather than in the enclosed spaces in which staff members and delegates had to work. She remained convinced that there was a problem with asbestos contamination on the fourth floor and that the Administration was ill-equipped to cope with a large five.

The meeting rose at 11.30 a.m.